



# ONE-ROOM SCHOOLS

## AN AMERICAN TRADITION

by Phyllis McIntosh

**W**eary of large impersonal schools where too many children fall between the cracks, educators and parents alike are singing the praises of small neighborhood schools with strong community ties. And after years of rigidly “tracking” students by ability, experts now think learning occurs best in classrooms with a mix of students working together, teaching one another.

These “modern” trends are nothing new. In fact, they were the norm in thousands of one-room schools that provided the only education available to most of rural America for 250 years. From the early 1800s to the mid-20th century, the landscape was dotted with these tiny centers of learning, where indomitable teachers combining the skills of educator, nurse, counselor, and drill sergeant presided over a roomful of students who could range in age from 5 to 20.

By the 1950s, one-room schools seemed obsolete. Postwar prosperity and better roads meant that school districts could bus children from several communities to new consolidated schools with modern facilities and a greater variety of learning opportunities. No longer used as schools, many of the original one-rooms live on, reincarnated as homes, shops, restaurants, and museums. However, at the dawn of the 21st century, according to the U.S. Department of Education, 411 of these one-teacher schools in tiny communities across the nation still continue to serve their original purpose—educating local children.

## History of One-Room Schools

In colonial America, formal education was limited mainly to middle and upper class children whose parents could afford to pay for subscription schools or private tutors. Home schooling was popular, especially for girls who were thought to need mainly household skills. However, Thomas Jefferson believed that free public education was essential to a strong democracy and advocated setting aside land for schools in the Northwest Territories—what would later become the states of Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin. In 1785 and 1787, the founding fathers passed ordinances mandating surveys to divide land west of the Appalachian Mountains into sections and townships, with one section in each township to be reserved for a school. Early statutes called for sale or lease of public lands to fund schools, but because of unscrupulous land speculators and the abundance of free land, these measures were ineffective.

It was not until around the time of the Civil War that the notion of tax-supported free public education became widely accepted. Local school districts, determined by township boundaries or other land survey units, were governed by unpaid school boards elected by and from the people who lived in the district. These school boards set taxes, hired and paid teachers, bought supplies for the school, and maintained the schoolhouse and grounds. Land for the school often was donated by a farmer who deemed the plot unfit for farming or who wanted the school located conveniently nearby.

Local people pitched in to build the school itself, usually among the first projects for a new community. The earliest schools were crude structures, built from whatever materials were at hand—wood, sod, adobe, or fieldstone. Children sat

on backless benches and worked at tables placed around the perimeter of the room. In log cabin schools common in the early 1800s, these surfaces were nothing more than smooth log slabs fastened to the walls with pegs. It was in such modest surroundings that many of the nation's Civil War leaders, including Abraham Lincoln, received what schooling they had.

By the 1870s, school districts began to replace the old schoolhouses with ones built according to architectural designs readily available from plan books. As evidence of their growing prosperity, many districts added embellishments, such as shutters, porches, pillars, vestibules, and belfries—which, depending on finances, may or may not actually have housed a bell. Schoolhouses also began to sport a coat of paint, but despite the popular image of the "little red schoolhouse," the most common color was white with perhaps touches of green, red, blue, or brown in the trim.

(opposite page) **Typical Classroom** This 19th century classroom displays an American flag and a portrait of President George Washington.

(below) **Schoolhouse in Vermont** This schoolhouse with a bell tower is typical of one-room schools built in the late 1800s.



© PhotoDisc / James P. Blair



**Students in a one-room school** Typically, students were arranged with younger students at the front of the room and older students at the back.



Nor was the typical one-room school the cheery place portrayed in popular drawings. In fact, it was often crowded, dark, and drafty. In the days before electricity, lighting was always a problem because many schools were built with windows on only one side, supposedly to eliminate eye strain caused by cross lighting. A pot-bellied stove, located in the center or corner of the room and fueled by wood, coal, corncobs, or cow chips, provided the heat. Students sweated or shivered, depending on their distance from the stove.

The 1870s were an era of educational, as well as architectural, reform. It was during this time that many school districts adopted the eight-grade system and started requiring students to pass an eighth grade exam in order to graduate. Classrooms, like school exteriors, took on a new look. The classic double-seated school desks, produced in sizes to accommodate all ages, were now commercially available, and at the urging of reformers, school districts installed them in rows in the center of the room. In many schools, the teacher's desk sat on an elevated platform at the front, which gave the teacher an air of authority over the older boys and provided a stage for plays, recitations, and spelling bees.

The turn of the century brought a few more classroom refinements. By

the early 1900s, most schoolchildren were writing on slate blackboards, saluting an American flag hanging in the front of the room, and theoretically at least, drawing inspiration from portraits of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln staring down from the walls.

### **The Teachers**

Despite the stereotype of the female *schoolmarm* (woman teacher), many 19th century teachers were male, partly because school boards thought men were better able to handle unruly farm boys. But by 1900, about 70 percent of rural teachers were schoolmarms, as teaching began to be seen as a woman's profession. The fact that school boards could get away with paying women much less than men was no doubt an important consideration.

It was not uncommon, in the early days of one-room schools, for the teacher to be younger than some of her students. Girls typically started teaching at age 15 or 16—as soon as they passed their eighth grade tests—with no further preparation. Then, during the late 1800s, states began requiring teachers to pass exams in order to earn teaching certificates. By the turn of the century, most teachers had some formal training, either through high school courses, summer institutes, or two-year normal schools that were the forerunners of state teachers' colleges.

The young schoolmarm's life was far from easy. Teachers were expected to adhere to a strict moral code and to set an example for the rest of the community. Pay included room and board, which meant that the teacher had to shuttle from family to family, often sharing a room and even a bed with some of the children. For a salary of only \$30 to \$40 a month, these young women functioned as teacher, nurse, counselor, disciplinarian, and janitor all rolled into one. On the frontier, they had to be ready to protect their charges from all manner of emergencies—from rattlesnakes to sudden blizzards and tornadoes. According to one harrowing account, a teacher and her students were forced to abandon a school bus during a terrible blizzard that struck the Nebraska plains in 1949. Unable to reach a nearby ranch, they were forced to build a snow shelter and survive on a few children's lunches while the storm raged for eight days. At last spotted by a search plane, the entire party was rescued unharmed.

Teachers also had to be masters of organization to teach a variety of subjects to as many as 50 or 60 students of varying abilities, often ranging in age from young children to young adults. On a typical day, younger students were called to the

front first to recite their lessons to the teacher, while older students worked on assignments at their desks. Because every child heard every lesson over and over, many students quickly advanced beyond their grade level, and skipping grades was common. Teachers often challenged bright older students by enlisting them to work with younger children who needed extra attention—a system with obvious benefits for all concerned.

Instruction focused on the so-called three Rs—readin', (w)ritin', and 'rithmetic—though many one-room schools also taught history, geography, hygiene, and penmanship. A century of school children, from the 1830s to the 1930s, learned to read from the famous *McGuffey's Readers*, a series that began with the alphabet and simple stories and advanced to selections from the most famous poets and authors of western literature. Besides teaching children to read, these books imparted important moral lessons and inspired children to greater achievements through selections with titles such as "What I Live For."

Learning occurred through rote memorization and recitation. Students memorized long poems and speeches by the likes of William Cullen Bryant, Henry Clay, and



**Phelps School** Lewis Hines, renowned American photographer, photographed this school in Comanche County, Oklahoma, in 1916.

## WEBSITES OF INTEREST

**The One-Room Schoolhouse Center**  
<http://www2.johnstown.k12.oh.us/cornell>

Maintained by a local school district in Ohio, this site has a wealth of information about the history of one-room schools. It also provides links to many one-room schools; some are still in operation and others have found new uses.

**One-Room Schoolhouse Project**  
<http://www.sckans.edu/~orsh>

Maintained by Southwestern College in Winfield, Kansas, this informative site includes history, pictures, and stories about one-room schools and the people who built and attended them.

**The One-Room Schoolhouse Resource Center**  
[http://sites.onlinemac.com/kcampbell/One\\_Room\\_Schoolhouses.htm](http://sites.onlinemac.com/kcampbell/One_Room_Schoolhouses.htm)

This site provides links to websites for specific schools and a bulletin board where people can exchange information related to one-room schools.

**Michigan One-Room Schoolhouse Association**  
<http://www.one-roomschools.org>

This unique organization collects information on one-room schools and holds an annual conference where people from all over the state learn how to research and restore one-room schoolhouses.

Daniel Webster and proudly recited them before the class. Competition was keen in such popular activities as spelldowns, or spelling bees, held in classrooms and as community events.

### **The School as Center of Community Life**

One-room schools were not only the center of education for rural communities; they were the center of social life as well. The little schoolhouse was the scene of many a church service, revival meeting, holiday celebration, box supper, music fest, and quilting bee. Schools hosted drama groups, literary and debate societies, and political meetings. In the South, some became famous as "moonlight schools," where illiterate adults of all ages and races gathered on moonlit nights to learn to read and write.

On the western frontier, the schoolhouse was sometimes pressed into service as a shelter against Indian attacks. And during the influenza epidemic of 1917, some schools doubled as makeshift hospitals.

### **One-Room Schools Today**

Isolated communities in some 30 states still rely on one-room schools. These tiny seats of learning include the Angle Inlet School on the Minnesota-Canada border, where a dozen or more students commute by boat, or in winter by snowmobile, from a nearby island, and the Tylerton School on Smith Island, Maryland, in the middle of the Chesapeake Bay, where enrollment sometimes dips as low as three students.

Just because they are small does not mean that one-room schools are lost in time. At the Wooden Valley School nestled among the vineyards of Napa Valley, California, students in kindergarten through sixth grade keep up with the modern world with 13 computers in their single classroom. And in Mountain Home, Idaho,

three of eight students enrolled at the Pine School were chosen to represent the United States at a science fair in Croatia.

But of the approximately 200,000 one-room schools still in use at the start of the 20th century, only about 12,000 buildings remain. Most are now the site of what Andrew Gulliford, author of *America's Country Schools*, calls "the new 3 Rs"—restoration, rehabilitation, and reuse. Hundreds of schoolhouses have been reclaimed as private homes, community centers, day care centers, banks, restaurants, bed and breakfast inns, offices, shops, theaters, and art galleries. Some have been preserved and moved to university campuses as centerpieces of modern colleges of education. Others have been restored by local historical societies and parks commissions as living history museums where children can spend a school day as their great-grandparents did.

But perhaps the greatest legacy of the one-room schools is what they taught us about education—the importance of individual attention, parent involvement, and community investment in the next generation. "New" educational concepts such as ungraded classrooms, peer teaching, and individual learning centers are modern ways of describing practices born of necessity in the one-room schoolhouses.

The late child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim saw tremendous advantage in one-room schools. There, he noted, the children had a common background, the teacher knew their families, and children helped teach others—a situation he described as "the best way for all children to learn." In short, Bettelheim declared, "The one-room school was the best school we ever had."





**C**ousins Esther Long and Ardith McClure attended three different one-room schools in rural southern Pennsylvania in the late 1940s and early 1950s. These are their memories.

### ON LIFE AT SCHOOL:

**LONG:** We had grades 1 through 8, probably 35 to 40 kids altogether. There were only two or three of us in my grade. The thing I remember most is the teacher had us memorize poetry and recite it to the class or copy it down in a written test. I thought it was dumb at the time, but some of those poems are now my favorites—*The Children's Hour* and *The Village Smithy* by Longfellow and Robert Frost's *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*.

**McCLURE:** I skipped third grade because the one or two other kids in my grade had moved and I was going to be the only one in third. So, the teacher came to our house and asked my mother if he could move me to fourth. I don't remember that I had any trouble keeping up in fourth grade.

**LONG:** We had no running water. We had a bucket and carried it to the neighbors to get our drinking water. Each of us had our own cups. We kept them on the windowsill and were responsible for taking them home and washing them. Probably that didn't happen very often during the year. We had outdoor toilets, one for each sex. The older kids had to go out and clean the toilets.

A teacher I was talking to recently reminded me about how the teacher had to oil the wood floors once during the year, usually with used motor oil. So, she would ask the kids to bring rags from home, and they got to slide around over the floor and at the same time soak up the excess oil.

**McCLURE:** We had a big old coal stove that sat in the back of the room. The real treat was that as you got older, you moved farther back in the room, and the choice seat was beside the furnace. Sometimes the older students were allowed to open the door and stir the coals around, which was a chance to get out of your seat. And it was nice and warm there.

Another treat was getting picked to go outside and clean the erasers. It was considered a reward because you got to go outside at least 15 minutes before school

was over. Of course, we sort of goofed off out there, knocking the erasers together.

### ON TEACHERS:

**McCLURE:** When Mr. Straley was teacher, you listened. He was also a barber, so he brought a razor strap to school. And he used it. Looking back, I think we probably learned more in that setting than kids today do—because of the discipline.

The last teacher I had was Mrs. McAfee, and I kept in touch with her until she died. If it was snowing or snow was predicted on a Sunday, she would come out and park along the main road and walk in to the school and stay there all night to get the stove going. There was no such thing as a snow day then—we just bundled up and walked to school. If the weather was really bad, she might stay for two or three nights, and then usually one of the families would take her to their place.

### ON DISADVANTAGES OF ONE-ROOM SCHOOLS:

**LONG:** I don't think there was a lot of one-on-one attention. If someone was slow or had a problem, it was another student that was responsible for helping because the teacher was busy.

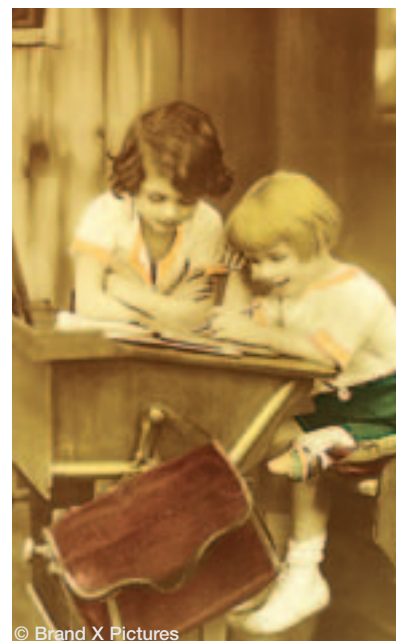
**McCLURE:** You went to school with the same people you played with in the neighborhood, so you never got to know anybody else. If there were kids you didn't like or who picked on you, you were stuck with them.

### ON MOVING TO A LARGER SCHOOL:

**McCLURE:** I was already young for my grade level, and then with skipping a grade, I was only 13 when I started high school. That was a bad transition. Going from a one-room school to a large school where you went to a different room for every class, I was overwhelmed. I couldn't find my way around. There was maybe one other girl from my one-room school, but we didn't have any classes together. I was scared, and I didn't want to be there. It took me a couple months to adjust.

**LONG:** When I got to seventh grade, they sent us to a three-room school for junior high. We were in the big time then because we got to change classes and had three different teachers. It was still small enough that it wasn't too much of an adjustment. But I do remember that, especially in history class, I was far behind what the kids from other one-room schools had learned. I think my teacher must have emphasized poetry instead of the Civil War!

**The one-room schools that Long and McClure attended closed in 1955. Solid structures made of red fieldstone common in southern Pennsylvania, all three have been renovated as private homes.**



**Pair Work** Two young girls work together on an assignment.

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